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The Big Break

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Abstract

"What time are they going to pick you up, Ann?" Ann's throat tightened, her stomach constricted into a hard knot and she struggled to swallow the suddenly tasteless mouthful of food...

A deep, throaty laugh startled the peace as a couple burst through the doors of the Golden Burro. — Ah . . . come on, Frankie, let's go one more. It's too early to go home! — The couple bumped unsteadily down the street — mumbling, then laughing.

Connie walked faster — past a dozen bars swelling with smoke, loud music and laughter — not easy laughter when one listened, but harsh — forced — loud.

— I just couldn't do it. I couldn't live like this. I'm not to say what is right and wrong — maybe someday I'll find out they did have the answer after all — not now though. There must be more — Dear God! There must be more!

The bus lurched forward. Connie stared — McKee's — the Golden Burro — the library — Kerrigan's house — the coal yards — then it was gone. She felt a strange closing in her throat — nothing you could forget about or swallow. It was hard not to look back this time — look back and remember the good times.

The bus pushed slowly around the steep turns and clombed higher — higher toward the white peaks — and then on — on down the other side.

—Sue Fitzsimmons, *T & C*, '56



The Big Break

“WHAT time are they going to pick you up, Ann?”

Ann's throat tightened, her stomach constricted into a hard knot and she struggled to swallow the suddenly tasteless mouthful of food. She laid her fork on her plate, and helplessly, though she tried not to look at him, her eyes raised and met her father's.

“About half an hour,” she mumbled.

“So you're really going through with it, you're going traipsing off to Cleveland, to the big city.” His voice rang

with the steel of sarcasm. His eyes held hers with a mixture of anger and contempt.

Why did he have to start again? Hadn't they been over all that a dozen times? Why did he have to keep hammering at her? She had explained it to him so many times, had composed and mentally edited her arguments, had tried to tell him in so many different ways these last three weekends. Why couldn't he just accept the fact that she was going and that it was too late to do anything about it now?

"Yes, I'm going, Dad. Going to set the big city on fire all by myself." She tried to edge her voice with contempt to match his. It didn't work, it never worked. It sounded ridiculous, a horribly weak attempt to imitate the master.

"Now, Dad," Bob said, "Why don't you leave her alone? Let her eat her dinner."

All right," her father said, "Eat your dinner." His eyes released hers and he went back to eating. "Did you get the tractor greased?" He and her brother began to talk about the next day's work.

Ann picked up her fork again and started to push her food around her plate. She knew she wouldn't be able to finish eating. He always started in on her at the dinner table. These weekends home from school had been a round of unfinished meals.

He would always start off with a question, harmless enough, and then turn her innocent answer into a catapult for belittling her. Her mother had tried to stop him many times, but he could silence her with a glance. Twenty-eight years of living with him had taught her mother that nothing could stop him. Twenty-eight years of complete domination, of giving in, to save an argument. Ann often wondered if her mother had always been that submissive. She couldn't have been, she had taught school for ten years before marrying Dad, she hadn't had anyone to depend on then, to dominate her. What was she like then? Ann had never figured that out and now she never would. Her mother wouldn't say much about her life then. Ann only knew that now and as far back as she could remember, her mother had been quiet, complying to Dad's very wish, without a complaint, spending lonely evenings at solitaire or working crosswords after he had gone to bed.

"What did you say, Mom?"

"You aren't eating, Ann. You've only got twenty minutes." Her mother spoke softly, nearly whispering. Dad's voice droned on in the background, explaining to Bob how the cultivator was to be put on the tractor.

"Not really hungry — few things yet to pack," Ann answered in the same tone as her mother. She rose. "Excuse me, please," she said loud enough for her father and her brother to hear.

"Where are you going?" her father said.

The trap, Ann thought, no matter what I say, he'll pounce on it. "Uh-Uh. . . ."

"She has to finish packing," her mother said quietly.

"Oh," he said.

Ann looked up quickly with surprise. Her father went back to eating. She turned and walked slowly to the living room and then fled up the stairs, still half fearing he would call her back.

In her room, she sat down before her dressing table. A round, already suntanned face looked back at her in the mirror. Short, dark hair, blue eyes, blue like her father's, quiet and steady. Always quiet and steady, except when they looked into his. "So like her father," everyone said. If they only knew how wrong they were.

Her eyes strayed to the reflection of the room behind her. Silly bulletin board, she thought. "Rogue's Gallery" she translated from the backward letters reflected in the mirror. Pictures tacked in scrambled confusion smiled back at her. High school graduation pictures, snapshots from both high school and college, reflected images of prom programs, dance ticket stubs, trinkets won at carnivals. All the other odd souvenirs with a meaning only for her, like the ribbon she'd worn on one of the twenty pigtails required at freshman initiation, a citation nominating her party pooper of the year from one of her college dates, a page from a play book that recalled the lines she'd fluffed in the senior class play, trinkets and souvenirs from college dances. She wished she could take all those momentos with her, but it wouldn't be practical. They'd probably have to live in the "Y" for a while in Cleveland, at least until she and Jo had found a room or an apartment.

Funny, she mused, how a person even forgot the names of some of those faces on that bulletin in just two years. So many of them were married now. She was even an "aunt" a couple of times already. She wondered how many of them had forgotten her name already — and how soon many of those at college would.

She glanced at her watch. Only fifteen minutes. She began to gather up the cosmetics from the dressing table.

As she walked to the bed to pack them, her eyes met the painting Jo had given her. The quiet scene of the lake and willows at college, painted from their favorite bench near it, had been a gift from Jo. "No special reason," she had said, "just thought you might like it".

It had been that same bench they had sat on in the early spring evenings, discussing their plans for making the "Big Break," as Jo called it. Neither of them was really getting anything out of college, so why not get out while the getting was good? They could go anywhere and start out all alone. It would be fun and for the first time, they'd be really independent. They decided on Cleveland when Jo remembered that one of her friends was driving back to her home there when school was out. There had been long sessions of hashing over all the pros and cons to the idea and they had finally decided definitely to go.

Sure, they'd be leaving a lot of things, people they'd had a lot of fun with, everything connected with college life, their families and all the plans their families had made for them. Well, hadn't they put quite a lot of the same kind of memories behind them when they'd graduated from high school and had gone to college? It wouldn't be so hard.

Ann fished her pajamas out from under her pillow and began to fold them. No, it wouldn't have been so hard, if it hadn't been for him.

She could hear Mom rattling dishes as she cleared the table. He was probably sitting in the living room, reading the paper.

She looked around the room once more, checking for forgotten things. Guess everything is packed, she thought.

She looked at her watch again. About ten minutes left. She couldn't stay up here until they came to pick her

up. If she went downstairs he'd probably have a few parting shots at her, but she really should go down. Aimlessly, she picked up her purse, found a cigarette and lit it.

"That you, Bob?" Someone was coming up the stairs.

"No, it's me." Dad answered.

Oh no! he was coming up here. She quickly stamped out the cigarette and shoved the ash tray under the bed. If he caught her smoking, that would really set him off.

He walked slowly into the room and sat on the bed.

"You all packed?"

"Yes, Dad, I guess so." Ann spoke carefully, almost in a monotone.

"Just thought I'd come up and see if I could help you carry anything down."

Ann stopped fiddling with the figurine on her dresser and turned slowly to look at him. Why, he sounded so different. Almost old. Her eyes searched the brown face which stared at the floor.

He was old! He sat, head bowed, his grey hair glinting in the light, the old faded, blue overalls and work shirt, and his hands — she'd never noticed them before, but they were cracked and dry from the field work, brown like dry leaves, curled in each other between his knees.

Something choked in her throat, but she kept her voice even and calm, more out of habit than anything. Even now, when she felt like running to him, sitting on his lap, as she must have when she was a baby (though she could never remember it), even now, when she felt like crying on that faded blue shoulder and telling him that — what could she tell him? She remembered all the harsh, cutting words, he had flung at her.

"I think I can carry that one down, that's all that's up here."

"Ah . . . uh . . . I just thought . . ." he mumbled. He lifted his eyes slowly to meet hers. There was nothing hard there now, no contempt, no power over her, only a hurt, pleading look that said so many things that had gone so long unsaid.

Then she was in his arms, sobbing quietly, until all the tight aching was gone. He patted her back, clumsily, with a

hand unused to any tenderness. "That's all right, now, don't cry, honey, please don't."

She straightened up and wiped her eyes.

"Well," he said, "Well." He got up quickly, rubbing his hands on his knees and turning away from her. "They'll be here any minute, we better get this bag down there."

She could almost see him gathering the broken pieces of his shell around himself, trying to get back to his usual brusequeness. She could hear Mom calling, "Ann, they're here."

He picked up the bag, cleared his throat and said, "You ready?"

"I'm ready, Dad."

—Polly Weiss, *Sci., Soph.*, '55-'56



A Peace

Back from the shore a certain place lies rustling quietly,
Alive in the night,
While the waters of the ocean slap loudly in the distance.
Cool, soft grasses overlap the edge of liquid warm and
fresh to moving air.
A slippery boulder waits
While beautifully veiled trees swish in the darkness to an
undirected breeze.
A low moon lies silver on shimmering diamond-black water
As the stars play games.
Peace is darkness set with twinkling lights.
Peace is the sound of moving branches, of distant waves, of
the sea rising and falling nearby, a rhythmic breathing.
Peace is the warmth of air; it is cool stone; it is crushed
grass.
Nothing follows peace.

—Ron Christensen, *E.E.*, Jr.

